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Work for the review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2018/227 and past practices, the report provides a description of the work carried out by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, in cooperation with other entities of the United Nations system, in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It contains a description of the preparation of the annual report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2018/64), on the basis of data pertaining to and analysis of the global Goal indicators, as mandated in paragraph 83 of the 2030 Agenda. Also described is the work undertaken to update the database on the global Goal indicators, including the launch of a new user interface, and to support countries in the implementation of the indicators at the national level. In addition, an update is provided on the progress of work on principles and guidelines for national reporting and dissemination platforms; the work on a federated system of national and global data hubs; and the work of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training.

The Commission is invited to take note of the work carried out and to comment on the progress of the work and the proposed work programme.

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I. Introduction

1. In its decision 49/102, the Statistical Commission welcomed the work by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat carried out in collaboration and cooperation with the United Nations system to support the systematic follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national, regional and global levels. That work was mandated by the General Assembly in paragraphs 4 and 11 of its resolution 71/313. Specifically, the Commission expressed its appreciation for the preparation of the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017* and the updating of the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database. In that context, the Commission requested the Division to make available adequate and complete metadata and compilation guidance on the indicators. It also welcomed the efforts to establish a federated system of national and global data hubs for the Goals and supported the establishment of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training, endorsing its terms of reference. Lastly, it welcomed the draft principles and guidelines for national reporting and dissemination platforms and requested the Division to report to the Commission thereon at its fiftieth session.

II. Sustainable Development Goals progress report for 2018

2. In 2018, two complementary reports were produced by the Division, with input from the United Nations system, on progress towards the Goals, to provide a global snapshot of the progress made and the remaining gaps. They inform and illustrate the situation, three years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, with regard to efforts to achieve that ambitious agenda for a better future for all people. The reports are based on data provided by national statistical systems.

3. The report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Goals (E/2018/64) provided important input to the deliberations of Member States at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2018. The second report, The *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018*, which was launched on 20 June 2018 and aimed at a wider audience, informed the media and the public about the progress made in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a user-friendly format.[1]

4. The reports show that people are living better lives than they were a decade ago, even in the regions facing the greatest development obstacles. At the same time, countries are facing mounting challenges on the journey towards the achievement of the Goals, such as a fast-changing climate, an increased number of conflicts, inequality and persistent pockets of poverty and hunger. Also highlighted in the reports is the pressing need for reliable, timely, open and disaggregated data to enable policymakers to take evidence-based decisions. It is stressed that political leadership, adequate resources and commitment to further expand data collection, production and dissemination are required to meet the data needs.

5. The reports are based on the global indicator framework developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, which was adopted by the General Assembly in July 2017 in its resolution 71/313. They are accompanied by a comprehensive statistical annex and the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database, containing country and regional data.

[1] Available at http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2018/.

III. Database

6. Accompanying the launch of *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018* was the release of the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database.[2] It contains the data on the global Goal indicators used in the above-mentioned reports and includes both country-level data and regional and global aggregates. It includes data for 144 of the 232 indicators and more than 1 million data records. An accompanying metadata repository[3] contains the metadata for the indicators that have an internationally established methodology and standards. Access to the country-level data and the metadata ensures full transparency as to the data and methodologies used for global reporting.

7. The database and metadata repository are maintained by the Division. The data and metadata are provided by international agencies and entities in accordance with their mandates; they are known as custodian agencies. For each value of the indicator, the custodian agency is also requested to indicate whether the national data were adjusted, estimated, modelled or the result of global monitoring.[4] For example, national data may be adjusted for international comparability or, where data are missing, estimated.

8. For the 2018 release, the user interface of the database was upgraded to allow more interactive and convenient access. An application programming interface is available, providing programmatic access to the database using the OpenAPI Specification.[5] Using a new and improved data processing system, efforts are under way to allow more frequent data updates (from a major annual update to multiple domain-specific annual updates) in order to provide users with access to more timely data.

9. The reports, database and metadata repository are hosted on the Goal indicators website,[6] which is maintained by the Division. The website also contains information on the work and activities of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the Goals monitoring and reporting toolkit for United Nations country teams.

IV. Electronic handbook on Goal indicators

10. In the 2030 Agenda, Member States were encouraged to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels that were led and driven by countries. As a result, there is a growing need for information targeted to

[2] Available at http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/.

[3] Available at http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/.

[4] The nature of the data is determined as follows: (a) Country data: produced and disseminated by the country (including data adjusted by the country to meet international standards); (b) Country data adjusted: produced and provided by the country, but adjusted by the international agency for international comparability to comply with internationally agreed standards, definitions and classifications; (c) Estimated: estimated based on national data, such as surveys or administrative records, or other sources but on the same variable being estimated, produced by the international agency when country data for some year or years are not available, when multiple sources exist or when there are data quality issues; (d) Modelled: modelled by the agency on the basis of other covariates when there is a complete lack of data on the variable being estimated; (e) Global monitoring data: produced on a regular basis by the designated agency for global monitoring, based on country data. There is no corresponding figure at the country level.

[5] Documentation in this regard is available at https://unstats.un.org/SDGAPI/swagger/.

[6] See http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/.

national statisticians on how to collect and calculate information on effort to attain the Goals, as well as monitor them, using data produced by national statistical systems. Realizing this need, the Division, in collaboration with the indicators' custodian agencies, recently launched an electronic handbook on the global Goal indicators.[7]

11. The handbook is intended to be a comprehensive reference source for methodological key aspects, such as concepts, definitions, sources and methods of calculation, that are essential to compiling the indicators. It also provides additional links and references to more detailed information, so that national statisticians can delve into detailed references when needed. Currently, the handbook covers some 120 tier I and tier II indicators and will be updated as required to account for methodological developments and to include additional indicators as their methodology becomes established and they are reclassified as tier II or tier I.

V. Work programme of the inter-agency working group on the global Sustainable Development Goals review

12. More than 50 international agencies and organizations contributed to the Goals progress reports and to the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database and metadata repository with data and analysis. To provide a working mechanism for the United Nations system to prepare the report, as mandated in the 2030 Agenda, the Division has been convening regular teleconferences with the agencies that provide data and analysis for the preparation of the annual progress reports and the regular updating of the database. Since 2017, an annual face-to-face meeting has also been organized to allow for easier exchanges and more in-depth technical discussion.

13. The inter-agency working group:

(a) Reviews and discusses plans for the production of the annual Goals progress report of the Secretary-General and the complementary, user-friendly annual report;

(b) Agrees on the structure, scope and coverage of the yearly reports and related contributions by the relevant organizations;

(c) Contributes to the regular updating of the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database, including by providing updates and refinements to the metadata, as needed;

(d) Exchanges information and updates on capacity development activities relating to statistics and indicators for the 2030 Agenda;

(e) Reports annually to the Commission as part of the present report.

VI. Development cooperation and technical assistance activities of the Division on Goal indicators

14. The Division, the regional commissions and the specialized agencies, funds and programmes have continued their close collaboration in the area of statistical capacity development. Currently, a $10 million United Nations Development Account programme, with the participation of all regional commissions, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the United Nations Human

[7] Available at https://unstats.un.org/wiki/display/SDGeHandbook/Home.

Settlements Programme and the Division, is being implemented to strengthen national statistical systems for the follow-up and review of the Goals, including by addressing specific data gaps. The programme is structured using four pillars: means of implementation, environment statistics and indicators, social and demographic statistics and indicators, and economic statistics and indicators.

15. Implementation began gradually in the fourth quarter of 2016. Most activities for the four pillars began with regional and subregional activities before progressively focusing on country missions, national training workshops, the development of specific guidelines, the collection of good practices and the development of online training courses. Initially, the programme was foreseen to gradually wrap up and conclude with a series of subregional and regional workshops by the end of 2019. A midterm evaluation, conducted by an external evaluator and concluded in November 2017, highlighted that the programme was progressing well and that its implementation was broadly on track, despite a delay in its inception. On the basis of the outcome of and recommendations provided in the evaluation report, it has been decided to extend the programme by a year, until the end of 2020, with additional funding of $1.5 million.

16. The programme also builds the capacity of developing countries in terms of strengthening the legal, institutional and organizational environment in which statistical authorities operate and promotes an integrated and consistent planning of statistical production and development to address increased data needs across multiple statistical domains. To support the development of an e-learning portal, including e-learning and training materials and courses for the production and use of Goal indicators, the programme has included support for the development of relevant guidelines and training materials. In particular, it supports the updating of the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*, the third edition of which was published in 2003, as requested by the Commission in its decision 48/103.

17. The updated handbook is conceived as a living document that will be available electronically. This will allow chapters to be drafted and released independently, in accordance with the priorities identified at the forty-ninth session of the Commission. The overall updating process is based on a country-led approach and supported by a drafting team of consultants, led by the Division and an advisory group comprising 21 countries and organizations. Currently, advance drafts of some chapters are being reviewed. The work on all chapters is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2020.

18. The Division has completed two more United Nations Development Account projects aimed at enhancing the statistical capacity of Member States for Goal monitoring. One project provided assistance to national statistical offices in six pilot countries to measure, monitor, assess and report on progress in achieving the 2030 Agenda and was completed in the first half of 2018. Its main outputs included an assessment of the statistical capacity of the pilot countries to monitor the global indicators and the development of a detailed statistical capacity gap assessment methodology. The other project supported Member States to develop and strengthen environment statistics and integrated environmental-economic accounting for improved monitoring of sustainable development and was completed at the end of 2017.

19. In December 2016, the Division formally agreed to conduct a project funded by the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to make the Goal indicators available to the broadest possible audience and to strengthen the capacity of countries in the compilation and use of the indicators. The project covers 20 countries in Africa and Asia, 9 of which participated in a previous project of the Division and the Department on the

Millennium Development Goal indicators. The current project will run until June 2021.

20. The main project activities are to support countries in the development of national strategies for monitoring the Goals, in the creation or upgrading of national data and metadata platforms of Goal indicators and in engagement with users of the Goal data. Deliverables at the global level are a Goal data and visualization platform, providing a global indicators database and comparisons between global and national data sets, and the establishment of automated data exchange based on the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange standard.

21. The Division has completed initial assessment missions in all new project countries. Detailed capacity gap assessments have been carried out in most countries, and the remaining assessments are planned for completion in the first half of 2019. National metadata workshops, to be conducted in the coming months, will provide training on the structure of metadata and the compilation of the Goal indicators. Furthermore, the Division will work with countries on broad user engagement to ensure that the national platforms are used for decision-making and reporting to the largest extent possible. The Division will also seek to respond to pilot countries' requests linked to improving data availability.[8]

22. In 2018, the Division has also piloted data exchange for Goal indicators, again using the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange standard, with two project countries, Cambodia and the United Republic of Tanzania. National Goal indicators from those countries were delivered to the Division's prototype data exchange website, where comparisons could be made between national and global Goal indicators. This work will continue until data and metadata exchange have been established with all project countries.

23. The Division also works closely with other international agencies within the strategic results group on integrated Sustainable Development Goal implementation, part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, through the work of a task team on country-focused data and reporting, co-chaired by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. The group was established in May 2018 to facilitate the provision of coherent support by United Nations country teams (resident and non-resident agencies) to national statistical systems for localization, monitoring and reporting on the Goals, including the indicators and targets. As part of these efforts, the Division hosts on its Goal indicators website a toolkit for United Nations country teams on Goal monitoring and reporting.[9]

24. A comprehensive overview of the Division's activities on technical capacity-building, including those relating to the implementation of the Goal indicators, is provided in document E/CN.3/2019/28. In addition, the report of the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, available in document E/CN.3/2019/4, provides information about the work on the implementation of the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data and the second United Nations World Data Forum. The report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (E/CN.3/2019/2) provides information about the work to implement the global indicator framework, such as methodological work on the indicators, data flows and efforts by the three working groups, on interlinkages, the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange standard and geospatial information.

[8] More information about the activities under the project is available at https://unstats.un.org/capacity-building/unsd-dfid.

[9] See https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unct-toolkit.

VII. Principles and guidelines for national reporting and dissemination platforms

25. In January 2018, the Division organized, in cooperation with partners, a conference on national reporting and dissemination platforms. Participants discussed and agreed on principles of Goal indicator reporting and dissemination platforms and guidelines for their application, which were submitted to the Commission at its forty-ninth session for information and review. The principles and guidelines have proved to be extremely useful in steering efforts under the above-mentioned project of the Department for International Development and other international initiatives to support countries in the development and implementation of their national reporting and dissemination platforms and were reviewed and discussed with countries on multiple occasions.

26. On the basis of the experiences in countries and further consultations, the principles and guidelines for their application underwent a final review. The updated principles and guidelines are provided as a background document. They can be used by countries, international agencies and other actors to evaluate and make decisions on platforms being proposed for implementation. For example, as part of the above-mentioned project of the Department for International Development, the Division has used the principles and guidelines to consider platform solutions and has encouraged countries to join long-term initiatives that will provide support for the platform beyond the end of the project to ensure sustainability.

VIII. Launch of a federated information system for the Goals

27. In March 2017, a research exercise on a federated information system for the Goals was initiated by the Division, in partnership with the Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI),[10] with the aim of exploring the feasibility of establishing a modern platform for collaboration among producers and users of statistical and geospatial data and information across national and global statistical systems. The exercise was based on a common vision of implementing the 2030 Agenda through effective access to and use of integrated statistical, geospatial and other sources of data, through technologies that facilitate interoperability, data sharing, visualization and dissemination, and collaboration across data producers. The following countries have joined the initiative: Brazil, Colombia, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Philippines, Qatar, Senegal, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United Republic of Tanzania and State of Palestine. Several countries have initiated consultations with the Division regarding participation in the system.

28. The initial pilot exercise delivered a proof of concept of the system that was discussed at a seminar held before the forty-ninth session of the Commission. Subsequently, the Commission, in its decisions 49/101 and 49/102, welcomed the efforts to establish the system to facilitate the integration of different data sources, promote data interoperability and foster collaboration among partners from stakeholder groups, including the geospatial community and other data providers, and to improve data flows and global reporting on the Goals.

29. With the launch of a United Nations data hub featuring layers of geospatially enabled data series from the Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database,[11] and its federation with an increasing number of national data hubs, the

[10] An international supplier of geographic information system software, web geographic information system applications and geodatabase management applications.

[11] Available at https://unstats-undesa.opendata.arcgis.com/.

initiative is now entering a full implementation phase, focused on the mobilization of resources and the expansion of the network of partners to broaden its reach and scope.

IX. Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training

30. The Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training has continued to take forward training in official statistics. Its first meeting was held on 8 March 2018, on the margins of the forty-ninth session of the Commission, at which the founding and advisory group members discussed the way forward and expanded the membership to include additional entities. There are currently 21 founding members of the Network, comprising 16 regional and international training institutes and 5 countries whose national statistical offices have statistical training centres that provide training beyond their national borders. In addition to the founding members, the Network includes members of the stakeholder advisory group, which currently encompasses eight national statistical offices. During its first meeting, the current President of the International Statistical Institute was elected as Chair of the Network.

31. The Network focuses on multiple streams of work to address such topics in statistical training as: (a) reviewing the current demand for and supply of training in official statistics by the founding members and conducting an analysis to see where gaps exist and ascertain where additional focus is required; (b) developing examples for training courses; (c) reviewing and auditing the technology used in training in official statistics and statistical systems; and (d) reviewing and assessing statistical literacy training, in particular around the data needs of policymakers. Four task teams were created to advance the activities relevant to each work stream. The activities of the Network are continuing.

32. Information on the current membership and the outputs of the Network is provided as a background document.

X. Points for discussion

33. **The Commission is invited:**

(a) **To take note of the present report;**

(b) **To endorse the principles and guidelines for national reporting and dissemination platforms;**

(c) **To express its views on the continuation of the implementation of the federated system of national and global Goals data hubs;**

(d) **To express its views on the progress of work of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training.**